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ABSTRACT

Because conventional foreign language classroom interaction is not amenable to, and can even undermine, learning of social conversational skills, the Department of State's Foreign Service Institute has created an activity to develop these skills. It involves preparation for and realization of a single event, a party hosted by State Department employees anticipating French-speaking posts abroad and interested in establishing contact with native French-speakers in the Washington, D.C. area. The activity has four parts: (1) students' analysis of their tasks as co-hosts for a multicultural party; (2) practice of interactive listening skills and conversation management devices, and establishment of a personal stock of topics and pertinent comments; (3) the party; and (4) debriefing. In the last phase, immediately after the party, teachers meet with guests to learn their perceptions of the experience and the students' skills. The next day, students discuss their experiences and complete a self-evaluation and exercise assessment questionnaire to determine needed followup skill development activities. The exercise has shown that students benefit from the preparation, everyone was able to participate despite ability differences, grammar was not a major impediment, dependence on the teacher was abandoned, the practice reflected real job responsibilities, and students were required to follow a conversation carefully. (MSE)

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Before we get down to business: Acquiring conversational skills in a foreign language

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CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS AS A PROFESSIONAL NEED

Our purpose this afternoon is to present a language training design for business and government professionals who need to acquire conversational skills for establishing and cultivating professional relationships in a foreign language and cultural environment.

Foreign Service officers and other government personnel interviewed at post reported that a fundamental part of their work involved engaging in social conversation for the purpose of making contacts at representational dinners and receptions and as a prelude to conducting interviews. At the same time, this was the one professional context in which they claimed to experience the most difficulty using French, noting particular difficulty with *following conversations* in multi-group settings.

For Foreign Service officers, "representation" is a job requirement. The purpose of representational lunches, dinners, and receptions is to establish or build relationships that may be useful down the road. The conversation that normally occurs at such events is intended to foster goodwill and ease. While it is not an occasion to seek information (one would not go in with a pre-set agenda), one is expected to absorb information and show interest in what the other person is saying.

Courses in business and professional French most often address language used in meetings, presentations, office communications, negociations, service encounters, but to a far lesser extent the language skills necessary for networking and developing business relationships. Yet, in the world of international business and foreign affairs, small talk *is* serious business. In many societies, including our own, it is inappropriate and not effective to launch into the substantive discussions of a business meeting before getting to know the other person. This phase is more protracted in some societies than in the US. It is not coincidental, therefore, that executive manuals and training courses devote space to advice on networking, how to work a room, and the art of small talk.

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CONVERSATION AND OTHER FORMS OF TALK

Small talk, chit chat, social conversation receive attention in executive training courses and manuels, but generally do not receive special attention in the foreign language curriculum. Part of the reason for this may have to do with the belief that conversation is an art that cannot be taught or that we already teach conversational French (German, Spanish, Japanese) in our classrooms.

Let us compare what we most often teach under the rubric of "conversation" with the features of ordinary social conversation.

A quick survey of recent foreign language and ESL textbooks on conversational skills reveals that the term "conversation" most often refers to role plays and discussions around specified topics and situations. Yet when we speak of "ordinary conversation," we are referring to a type of verbal behavior that is quite different from presentations, interviews, discussions, or service encounter routines. Recall that for ordinary conversation, there is no specified setting, no required roles, and no *pre*-specified agenda. Participants have equal rights and responsibilities for sustaining the conversation, asking questions, raising or changing topics. Once opened, either participant has the right to close it at any time. Conversations evolve or dissolve, or are interrrupted. The only "goal" of a conversation is to build or maintain a relationship; as such, the conversation has to feel "comfortable," not awkward. Compare this with discussions, meetings, negociations, or interviews, all of which take place in specified settings, with a specified agenda or topic, where one person holds floor and allocates turns at talk, and where there is a specified beginning and ending to the event.

PROBLEMS TEACHING CONVERSATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Discussions and meetings, negociations, interviews, reports, and service encounters can be successfully simulated in the classroom. Conversational dynamics, on the other hand, are difficult to replicate within the structure of the classroom for a number of reasons. For one, conversation does not always take place in pairs, particularly at the representational lunches and receptions just mentioned; it is not always the comfortable, intimate one on one interaction. When conversation involves multiple participants, the focus of the lesson must switch from speaking to *following* a series of exchanges, following a topic and shifts in topic. The vicarious experience students have when they observe and analyze a videotaped authentic conversation still does not provide them with the experience of having to jump into the conversation. Moreover, the conventional classroom interactional pattern of teacher-led lessons identified by Mehan (1985) and others, where the teacher initiates, the student responds, and the teacher

evaluates the student's response is not amenable to and can undermine the objectives of learning social conversational skills. In the classroom, the teacher is often tempted to enforce her turn-taking rights and correction privileges.

Faced with these constraints, we asked ourselves how we could stimulate students to interact in a natural way, adopting behaviors that would be culturally acceptable and professionally useful. How could we help learners to experience and practice the quick-moving multi-party interaction? We decided that role play was not the solution, since conversation—the flow of the topics (much less conversation's*occurrance* among participants!) are unpredictable. Nor would providing students with list of functions, speech acts, gambits, and routines and having them rehearse them get at the essence of the experience. We had to devise an activity that would take language learning out of the classroom.

DESIGN OF THE ACTIVITY

The activity itself is centered around the preparation and realization of an event: a party hosted by our students as US Department employees headed for posts abroad and interested in establishing contacts with native speakers of French in the Washington area. Follow-ups on these first meetings are up to our students and their guests.

There are four parts to the activity:

First is the students' analysis of the task of what they will need to do to perform as cohosts of a party where all the guests will be native French speakers from different parts of the globe. The task is given to the students along with some ground rules such as to engage and pursue a conversation with at least four different guests, to draw other guests into their conversation, and to keep interaction with their fellow students or teachers at a minimum.

Analysis of the task leads students to the *second* part of the activity: the development and practice of the necessary skills and strategies (interactive listening skills and conversational management devices) as well as establishing a personal stock of topics and pertinent comments on them. The teacher during this part is a language consultant and a role player during simulations. Length and depth of this preparation phase will vary from one group to another depending on the needs and experience of the learners.

The *third* phase of the activity is the party itself. The arrangement of the room is important: minimum number of chairs, location of buffet or bar, etc. It is done to facilitate circulation and thus encourage a maximum of interactions between the hosts and their guests.

The *last* phase is the debriefing phase.

Immediately following the party, teachers meet with the guests to ask them a few questions, such as: Did you have problems understanding your hosts or being understood by them? What did you talk about? Did anything a

student said or did shock you? Did you feel awkward at any time during the part (e.g., neglected, ignored)?

The next day, students meet together and report briefly to each other (in French) on who they spoke with, what they learned, and what they noticed (simulating the formal or informal debriefing that would actually happen at post after such an event). The teacher does not directly participate in this phase, although he or she may take notes for further class activities.

Finally, students are asked to complete a self-assessment and exercise evaluation questionnaire which, along with feedback from the guests and oral report will permit the teacher to determine if preparation was adequate or not, if there is a need for reinforcement of some skills or strategies.

CONCLUSION

What did *we* learn from conducting this pilot language training design?

1) Students benefitted from the preparation.

2) Despite individual differences in abilities, everyone was able to participate.

3) Grammar did not seem to be a major impediment or factor in such a setting. What bothered students the most was their lack of facility using "conversational management devices" and dealing with the unexpected—register or vocabulary not previously exposed to. With conversation, no single party is in control—anything can happen.

4) At the same time, when students are put in charge, they are liberated students from dependence on the teacher. Students testified in their written comments to the value of this activity for building confidence using the language. Indeed, students need to be at ease using the language if they are to put others at ease.

5) Students reported that the exercise reflected exactly the kind of work they had to do in their jobs at post. This was not surprising. They were the experts. We did not hand out lists of vocabulary or functions to the students—the students identified the functions as well as key line phrases that *they* felt they needed based on their own experience. They built up their own repertoire of topics. Each person/class came up with and rehearsed a slightly different set.

6) Students found the exercise valuable for forcing them to deal with background noise and contend with a variety of voices, accents, speech styles within a single hour. This exercise, unlike others, required the students to follow the thread, twists, and turns of the conversation in multi-party groups, and be able to join in appropriately, as they would in a setting of this sort. They had to not only speak, but display interest and involvement in what the other person was saying.

This last point leads us to conclude with a paradox. "Conversation" is commonly viewed as a speaking activity. Yet some 50-98% of conversation is *listening*. The larger the number of conversational participants, the greater the role listening plays in maintaining one's involvement in the conversation. Yet listening, particularly *interactive listening*—understanding and displaying understanding and involvement—is a neglected component of language training. How easy it is to overlook the fact that one can *participate* in a conversation without extended speech. In the context in which our students must work, not only are they accountable for what they learn or notice, but one of the keys of diplomacy is to act interested in what people are saying to you. Showing that you are listening is a way of treating the other party with respect. The conversation that occurs before getting down to business has less to do with speaking than with listening to the client or customer, the most important person in the interaction.

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